

A SHORTHAND "INVENTOR" OF 300 YEARS AGO.

Among the forgotten worthies enshrined in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is one Thomas Arkisden (fl. 1633), of whom it is recorded that he was educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and while at the university "invented a shorthand alphabet which has acquired a peculiar interest in consequence of its similarity to other systems of stenography published somewhat later, especially to those of William Cartwright and Jeremiah Rich." Arkisden's name finds no place in historical accounts of shorthand published in this country, but in William P. Upham's *Brief History of the Art of Stenography*, Salem, Mass., 1877, his alphabet is reproduced, and attention drawn to its likeness to that used by Ralph Fogg, town clerk and first clerk of the Quarter Court at Salem, whose shorthand minutes on the court and town records of 1636-39 are preserved. The claim sometimes made that Arkisden's was the first shorthand alphabet introduced into America may be considered sufficient justification for placing on record certain facts which enable us to clothe with flesh and blood a hitherto shadowy figure.

The register of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, shows that "Thomas Archensden" was admitted on 23 March, 1625-6, and that "Thomas Arkasdon" matriculated as a pensioner from the same college in Easter term, 1626. A fellow-student at Emmanuel, Forth Winthrop, who matriculated pensioner in the same term, was the third son of John Winthrop, soon to become Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company and one of the foremost figures in the Puritan migration to New England. Writing to his father from Cambridge on 1 May, 1627, young Winthrop alludes to "Tho: Archisden my chamberfellow,"¹ and the latter's name occurs repeatedly and with much diversity of spelling in the "Winthrop Papers" of this period, showing that he was on friendly—not to

¹Robert C. Winthrop's *Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, Boston, 1864, i. 231.

say intimate—terms with the family. “Heare was with me Thomas Axden,” writes Forth’s mother from Groton Manor to her husband in London, “and brought a letter from Forth w^{ch} I send you”;² and in the postscript of another letter: “There came one for money for Thomas Arkesden; grandmother and I payed it.”³

In 1629-30 Arkisden graduated B.A., and in the following September Forth Winthrop styles his college chum “Sr Arkisden”⁴—perhaps an indication that he had taken orders. The date of his ordination is uncertain, but proof of his having entered the ministry is found in a letter addressed by Arkisden “To his much deserving friend Mr Edward Howes at Mr Downings in fleet street by the conduit”:—

“It was the 29th day of this month before I arrived at Cambridge haven and I am again bound for Suff: within this day or two—the occasion of it is this. Mr Jacy⁵ who is Mr Gurdon’s⁶ chaplain unexpectedly was sent for into his own country and it will be about six or seven weeks before he returns whereupon I being then in Suff: was earnestly requested to supply his place whereunto I did assent. I knew it would be some trouble to me but being in some respects obliged to them I dared not to shew myself so disrespectful of them as to give a denial—Mr Gostlin⁷ with all his family are in good health. I preached at Groton the last Lord’s day being overswayed with their entreaties—I preached also at Waldingfield parvâ the same day, but at night having been unaccustomed to such exercises I was almost quite tired. I received your letter: I am glad of that news whereof you writ unto me. I have not as yet heard from Anthony. Our College is now about enlarging our College with the addition of a new building—the charges of it will come to 1000^{li}—they have the money out the College treasury:

² *Ibid.*, i. 228.

³ *Ibid.*, i. 266.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ii. 81. Forth Winthrop lived only two months after this, dying before he was 21.

⁵ Henry Jessey or Jacie (1601-1663). See *D.V.B.*

⁶ Brampton Gurdon (d. 1649), of Assington, was related to the Winthrops.

⁷ Thomas Gostlin (b. 1588) had married Governor Winthrop’s sister Jane in 1612.

I pray remember my service to Mr and Mrs Downings^s—give them many thanks from me for their kindnesses to me: remember [my entire affection to Mrs Mary], my hearty love to all the rest—Thus also not forgetting my obgement to yourself, I alway remain, in all readiness to gratify your kindness, T. A.

“From Cambridge Jan^y 30. 1631 ” [*i.e.*, 1632].

Little is known of Edward Howes save that he was a close friend and correspondent of John Winthrop the younger, Forth's elder brother. The most intriguing part of Arkisden's letter to him consists of the half-dozen words within brackets. According to Mr. James Bowdoin, who prepared the original for publication, they were struck out by another pen, and on the outside is written in Howes' hand: "This letter is from Mr Arkisden I pray view the other and if you think good seal it up and deliver it according to the superscription of it; otherwise lacerate or inflame it as you please."⁹ This singular note was evidently addressed to John Winthrop, jun., who had joined his father in New England in the previous November, taking with him his wife and sister Mary. It has been surmised that the "other" letter contained an offer of hand and heart to Mary Winthrop, and colour is lent to the conjecture by Arkisden's visits to Groton, the Winthrops' Suffolk home. Apparently the curate's suit was not regarded favourably, or it may be that his affection cooled. On 7 March, 1631-2, Howes tells his friend John Winthrop, jun.: "Mr Arkisden and I do now and then interchange letters. He in his last promised to send letters for New England but I have not heard of him this three weeks":¹⁰ and on the following 20 April: "I pray you thanke your sister for her remembrance of me (Mr Arkisden thinks you have all forgotten him)."¹¹ A year later he wrote: "Mr Arkisden is at Mr Gurdon's—he presents his service to you, but hath written soe lately to you and being

⁸ Emmanuel Downing, father of Sir George Downing, had married Governor Winthrop's sister Lucy in 1622, and in 1638 went with his family to New England.

⁹ *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd ser., ix. 239.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

constrained to be very studious at this tyme he desires excuse: yet I have made bold to send you here enclosed his last letter written to me, that you may perceiue he is both well and thrives in his studies, &c."¹² Whatever the explanation, the parson's wooing seems to have been of short duration, and in 1633 Mary Winthrop took to herself a husband at Boston. Her marriage to the eldest son of Deputy-Governor Dudley may not improbably have been considered in all respects a better match.

To Edward Howes, the common friend of Arkisden and the Winthrops, we are indebted for all that is known of the shorthand system by which his name survives. Writing on 23 November, 1632, to the younger Winthrop, "at the Mattachusetts in New England," Howes remarks:—

"As for my vsuall characters, they are that where-with I conceiue you to haue bin formerly acquainted, vizt. Mr. Arkisden's, whoe hath sent you a letter here inclosed in John Samfords. I though[t] good to send you his character, for feare you should haue forgotten it, as thus

A	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	h	i	k	l	m	n
~	—	l	c	o	✓	7	9	h	9	.	o	u	^	—
		o	p	q	r	r	f	s	t	u	w	x	y	z
		c	o	9	7	L	S		/	✓)	∞	γ	Z

They are approued of in Cambridge to be the best as yet invented; and they are not yet printed nor comon. You may abbreviate them thus, c. for Christ, 9 God, . Jesus, o king. u lord, o people, &c. / stands always for the, / for thee, 9 for w. or wh. A little vse will make perfectnes; send me word whether you like it, and I will send you more direccions."¹³

Shortly after the date of this letter John Winthrop, jun., who became subsequently Governor of Connecticut, was supervising the settlement of Ipswich, Massachusetts, and his wife (before her marriage on 8 February, 1630-1, she was his cousin, Martha Fones) remained in Boston. Whilst thus separated they corresponded frequently, and it is interesting to learn that in their letters both husband and wife made

¹² *Collections of the Mass. Hist. Society*, 3rd ser., ix, 255.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4th ser., vi, 151. As to Howes see *D.N.B.*

copious use of shorthand, apparently for such passages as related to private and personal matters. Although we are not told what system of shorthand they employed, there can be little room for doubt that it was the one of which Edward Howes had supplied the key. Many of these letters are preserved among the Winthrop family papers, and they furnish one of the earliest instances yet brought to light of the use of the winged art in the new world. Indeed, we have the authority of the late Charles 'Currier Beale, a diligent student of shorthand lore, for the statement that Martha Fones Winthrop was "the first American woman stenographer yet known to fame."¹⁴

Occasional references to Thomas Arkisden are found in later letters from Howes to Winthrop. In June, 1633, he writes: "Mr. Arkisden is very well, and hath bin steward of his colledge; and is nowe in the very acte of commencing Master."¹⁵ The university records show that he took his M.A. degree in that year.

Arkisden's connection with Buckinghamshire has been established by Mr. W. Bradbrooke, who ascertained that a "Thomas Arckiden" was described in 1636 as "mynister of Bletchley." Here he found consolation for the loss of Mary Winthrop in the society of the rector's daughter, and on 25 April, 1636, he was married to Alice,¹⁶ one of the ten children of the Rev. William Sparke, Rector of Bletchley. The news that "Mr. Arksden is maryed" was duly conveyed to Mary Winthrop's mother in a letter from the latter's sister-in-law, Lucy Downing, dated 19 May, 1636,¹⁷ and thereafter the name of Arkisden disappears from the Winthrop correspondence.

The parish register of Bletchley records the baptism of two children of Thomas and Alice Arkisden, the eldest (named Alice after her mother) in 1637, and the

¹⁴ *Proceedings of the New York State Stenographers' Association*, 1907, Albany, 1908, p. 21.

¹⁵ *Collections of the Mass. Hist. Society*, 4th ser., vi. 489.

¹⁶ She was a grand-daughter of Dr. Thomas Sparke, Rector of Bletchley, one of the divines of the Hampton Court Conference; and her mother was a daughter of Dr. Richard Brett, Rector of Quainton, and one of the translators of the Authorised Version. She was also connected by marriage with the Downings and other well-known Puritan families.

¹⁷ *Collections of the Mass. Hist. Society*, 5th ser., i. 11.

second (William)¹⁸ in 1641. On 29 November, 1638, Thomas Arkesden compounded for First Fruits as Rector of Aspley Guise, Bedfordshire, and the register of that parish furnishes the baptismal entries of seven more children, the youngest in 1675, and establishes his identity with the Bletchley "mynister." He must, therefore, have married a second time, unless we allow the unlikely circumstance of his wife Alice adding arrows to the rectory quiver after nearly 40 years of married life. The name of his second wife has hitherto eluded research. The Rev. Thomas Arkisden lived on until 1862, and was laid to rest on June 10 at Aspley Guise.

It is much to be regretted that no trace of Arkisden's shorthand has been found at Bletchley or Aspley Guise, as fuller details of his method would have been welcome. With few exceptions, the characters of his alphabet are identical with those adopted by Edmond Willis for his *Abreuiation of Writing by Character*, 1618, there being a much closer affinity between these two than between Arkisden's system and the later one of Cartwright-Rich. The authors of a "Critical and Historical Account of the Art of Shorthand" contributed to the *National Stenographer* (Chicago, 1892), pointed out that in Arkisden's alphabet the "waved" sign for *a* is noticeable as "in all probability the earliest instance of the character compounded by blending two horizontal semi-circles," but it is not otherwise remarkable on the score of originality. Arkisden's alphabet exhibits defects characteristic of nearly all the shorthand systems of his time. One notable exception is embodied in a MS. entitled *Characterisme*, now in the British Museum, which has been assigned with much probability to a date near 1630. The anonymous author discards entirely the compound characters of Willis and his school, substituting an alphabet of simple strokes and making a serious attempt to group them in accordance with their phonetic relationship. This system represents an immense advance upon anything known to have been

¹⁸ On 18 June, 1694, a William Arkesden was granted a licence for his marriage to Mary Matthews (*Calendar of Marriage Licences issued by the Faculty Office, 1632-1714*, Index Library, 1905, p. 126).

devised before the next century, and had it not, like Arkisden's, remained unpublished, must have exercised a far-reaching influence on the development of the art.

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